DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 351 CE 067 931

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TITLE The Changing Role of Support Staff. Trends and Issues Alerts.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002001
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Change; Clerical Occupations; *Emerging Occupations; *Employment Level; Employment Patterns; *Employment Qualifications; *Job Development; *Secretaries; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

As many organizations restructure, the role of support staff is also changing. Secretaries are under increased workloads and are assuming duties previously performed by management, such as budgeting, project coordination, and public relations. According to Professional Secretaries International, only 31% of its members bore the title "secretary" in 1993 compared to 46% in 1979. Technology has been a driving force behind many of the changes affecting secretarial/support staff positions. One researcher has concluded that technology is being used merely to automate traditional secretarial tasks rather than to expand secretaries' roles; however, other researchers have found few secretarial/support staff who feel that technology has reduced their opportunities or degraded their positions. Recent technological and organizational changes have, in fact, been credited with helping to increase the prestige and salaries of many support staff. Secretaries are not always compensated or promoted for assuming additional responsibilities, however. The increasing responsibilities being assumed by support staff are necessitating higher education and training, but formal training for technology and managerial/supervisory duties is somewhat lacking. (Included in this trend analysis are an annotated bibliography of 23 print resources and a list of 3 organizations concerned with secretarial occupations and recent developments affecting them.) (MN)

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The Changing Role of Support Staff
Trends and Issues Alerts

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

by Sandra Kerka

1995

The Changing Role of Support Staff

As organizations in the late 20th century restructure and reengineer themselves into new shapes, the role of support staff is being transformed. In these flatter, leaner organizations, secretaries have greater visibility, their workload is increasing, and many have assumed duties previously performed by management (Administrative Development Institute [ADI] 1994), such as budgeting, project coordination, and public relations. Use of the title "secretary" is declining: only 31% of Professional Secretaries International (PSI) members bore the title in 1993, compared to 46% in 1979. "The secretary's role in the workplace is becoming more specialized, with a higher concentration on software and equipment knowledge" (PSI 1993, p. 19). Technology is the driving force behind much of the change. In addition to word processing, support staff now deal with fax, voice and electronic mail, local area networks, desktop publishing, spreadsheets, and database software. Marino (1993) concluded that technology is being used merely to automate traditional secretarial tasks, not to expand roles. However, few support staff feel technology has reduced opportunities or degraded their positions; many feel that it has enhanced them (ADI 1994; Sullivan 1993, 1994). Information technology represents an important opportunity. According to Strassman (1987), "the value-added secretary of the future will have to have mastery over the electronic medium. . . . Secretaries should focus on electronics-aided management of recorded knowledge as their primary value to the organization" (pp. 16-17). "The new middle manager is the secretary who controls the technology" (Hennebach 1989, p. 44). Support staff are well positioned to join the emerging "knowledge work force."

Although technological and organizational changes have helped increase prestige and raise salaries (PSI 1994a), one downside is that secretaries are not always compensated or promoted for assuming additional responsibilities (ADI 1994). Too many companies still base secretaries' salaries on their managers' level (Stone 1994). Additional responsibilities necessitate higher education and training, but formal training for technology and managerial and supervisory duties is somewhat lacking (ADI 1994; Alexander and Underwood 1994). The profession remains largely female (99.5%) and is aging (70% over 40) (PSI 1993, 1994a). However, as stereotypes lessen and new career paths open, the field may become an attractive option for more entry-level workers.

Print Resources

Administrative Development Institute. ***Impact of Restructuring on the Secretarial Profession.*** Holland, MI: ADI, 1994. (ED 368 900)

Survey of PSI members showed how their workload has changed and increased; most feel positive about changes, but assert a need for more training and better compensation.

Akeyo, V. T., and Pollard, C. "Telecommunications Competencies for Clerical Office Professionals." ***Office Systems Research Journal*** 11, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 21-26. (EJ 470 005)

Administrative assistants, executive secretaries, and word processor operators need competence in telecommunications, especially fax, voice mail, electronic mail, local area networks (LANs), and audiotelecónferencing.

Alexander, M. W., and Underwood, R. "Database Software Use in the Contemporary Office: Implications for Trainers and Educators." ***Office Systems Research Journal*** 12, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 3-8.

A survey of 490 office professionals indicated that 70% are familiar with database management software, 39.8% use it daily and 21% weekly. Only 41% received formal training in its use.

Forrest, D. "From Handmaiden to Power behind the Throne." ***Canadian Business*** 64, no. 7 (July 1991): 48-53.

The role of the secretary is becoming more of an administrative manager. Most secretaries work for a team of managers, but executive secretaries still usually work with a single boss.

Grubb, D. J. "From Typist to Technical Master." ***Women in Business*** 46, no. 4 (July 1994): 36-37.

Executive secretaries need skills in planning, organizing, communicating, managing time, and setting priorities.

Hennebach, C. M. "No More Excuses for Not Training Secretaries." ***Training and Development Journal*** 43, no. 8 (August 1989): 43-46. (EJ 393 213)

Three trends make career development for secretaries especially important: an increasingly white-collar work force, low productivity and secretarial shortages in offices, and redefinition of the role of management.

Irwin, M. L. "Male Secretaries: Ending the Stereotype." ***Secretary*** 50, no. 3 (March 1990): 11, 13.

Of 50 male PSI members surveyed, 40% chose the field as a career, 32% as a step to management. Lower-level job tasks were decreasing; increasingly, they compose correspondence, do research, supervise, and do public relations.

Johnson, V. "Changing Times: The Evolving Role of the Secretary." ***Successful Meetings*** 40, no. 8 (July 1991): 99-101.

The changing role of secretaries will affect a company's competitive edge. Secretaries now perform budgeting, planning, desktop publishing, computer maintenance, and facility logistics.

Manter, M. A. "The 1990s: Secretaries Discover New Career Paths." ***Secretary*** 50, no. 4 (April 1990): 6, 8-9.

Descriptions of the diverse roles of secretaries demonstrate the many career options available: administrative/office management, desktop publishing, finance, computer/information management, sales support, and project management.

Marino, P. "Job Design and Skill Level in Using Information Technology." *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* 35, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 121-137. (EJ 470 051)

Responses from 408 administrative support personnel revealed a large percentage proficient only in text-related computer technology; few could use spreadsheet, database, or graphics applications. Higher skill levels correlated with perceptions of job enrichment.

McGee, K. G. "Survey: Secretary or Assistant?" *New Woman* 23, no. 12 (December 1993): 32.

Found that the use of the title "secretary" has decreased considerably over 5 years.

Professional Secretaries International. *Professional Secretaries International Member Profile.* Kansas City, MO: PSI, 1993.

This profile, based on responses from 755 PSI members, illustrates the changes in secretarial and related office professions in terms of demographics, compensation, type of workplace, and responsibilities.

Professional Secretaries International. *Career Paths for Office Professionals.* Kansas City, MO: PSI, 1994a.

Responses from 1,098 PSI members identified job tasks of office workers, their titles and salaries. Also revealed were their career ambitions, differences among positions, and the education and training needed to achieve career goals.

Professional Secretaries International. *PSI Model Curriculum for Office Careers.* Kansas City, MO: PSI, 1994b. (ED 364 659)

This curriculum is intended to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes office professionals need to succeed in the reengineered office of the 1990s.

Spalter-Roth, R., and Hartmann, H. *Raises and Recognition: Secretaries, Clerical Workers and the Union Wage Premium.* Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 1990.

This study of administrative support personnel presents the changing demographics of the field, the effect of union membership on wages, the impact of technology, and the barriers to career mobility faced by office workers.

Stone, F. "Secret Weapon: Your Secretary May Be an Overlooked Resource." *Management Review* 83, no. 3 (March 1994): 36-41.

Secretaries in today's flatter organizations have mastered organizing and prioritizing, and many are taking responsibility for tasks that previously were considered solely the province of management.

Strassmann, P. A. "Knowledge Management: Opportunity for the Secretary of the Future." *Secretary* 47, no. 6 (June-July 1987): 14-17. (EJ 355 158)

In the knowledge-based workplace, secretaries are gatekeepers of the electronic channels, having responsibility for managing electronic information and connections.

Sullivan, V. "Secretarial Role in Transition." *Canadian Vocational Journal* 26, no. 3 (February 1991): 4-6. (EJ 423 967)

A comparison of 1980 and 1987 studies of graduates of a bachelor of secretarial arts program indicates that significant change has occurred: fewer women are entering the business education teaching profession, salaries have improved, and the "office of the future" has become the office of the 1990s.

Sullivan, V. "The Computer and the Meaning of Work." *Journal of Education for Business* 68, no. 4 (March-April 1993): 197-201. (EJ 462 089)

The majority of 166 respondents to a survey of 529 administrative support personnel did not experience the alienating influence of the computer and were enthusiastic about its integration into their work lives.

Sullivan, V. "Paradigm for the Future: The Knowledge Worker in the Learning Organization." *Office Systems Research Journal* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 25-30.

According to responses from office/secretarial graduates, 75% worked 4-6 hours per day on varied computer tasks. They used higher order thinking skills and considered technology to be a career enhancer.

Truss, C. J. G. "The Secretarial Ghetto: Myth or Reality." *Work, Employment and Society* 7, no. 4 (December 1993): 561-585.

Comparison of secretarial functions in England, France, and Germany shows that, although secretaries are more flexible and valued than the popular perception, it still may not be the best route for advancement.

Waldrop, J. "More than a Typist." *American Demographics* 16, no. 4 (April 1994): 4.

Some 95% of secretaries in a 1992 PSI survey used word processing software, compared to 71% in 1987. Secretaries today also have considerable buying power when it comes to computer equipment.

Wishner, B. "Survey Shows: Secretaries Do It All." *Secretary* 50, no. 7 (August-September 1990): 27-29.

A survey received 261 responses from Fortune 500 executive secretaries, of whom 51% have college degrees and 71% belong to professional societies. Interest and challenge inspired them to choose this career; financial rewards motivated them to continue.

Resource Organizations

9 to 5, National Association of Working Women, 614 Superior Avenue, Room 852, Cleveland, OH 44113 (216/566-9308)

Office Systems Research Association, c/o Administrative Office Systems, Southwest Missouri State University, 901 South National Avenue, Springfield, MO 65804-0089

Professional Secretaries International, 10502 NW Ambassador Drive, P.O. Box 20404, Kansas City, MO 64195-0404 (816/891-6600)

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